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ABSTRACT

Until recently marriages that endured 20 years or more have been considered long-term. And only in recent years have marriages of 50 or more years duration been plentiful enough to be studied. The course of marital satisfaction across the years was traced in the 17 surviving couples of the Berkeley Older Generation Study, a group that has been interviewed in young adulthood (1929-30), in middle age (1945-47), in young-old age (1968-69), and in old-old age (1982-83). An analysis of the transition between young-old and old-old revealed that the later years showed the greatest adjustment and satisfaction for most couples. The results indicated that husbands and wives viewed their marriages differently, with husbands being more satisfied and optimistic in their reports. Personal characteristics were found to be more significant in the success of marriages than socioeconomic factors or availability of children. Although women professed a stronger need for friendships, for both sexes, those high in marital satisfaction tended to have fewer outside activities. Health was found to affect marital quality only in that illness in one partner was constructive to the relationship, increasing the bond between husband and wife. (NRB)

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Marriages over Half a Century:

A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

This study traces the course of marital satisfaction across the years in very long-term marriages: 55 to 69 years duration. Seventeen couples, survivors of the sample drawn from parents of every third baby born in Berkeley, California, in 1928-1929, were intensively interviewed in three or four life stages: young adulthood, middle age, young-old age, and old-old age, at the Institute of Human Development, University of California. These men and women were 73 to 93 years old when interviewed in 1982-1983.

Factors affecting the success of these marriages are examined. The course of marital satisfaction varies, with the later (old-old) years showing the greatest adjustment and satisfaction for most couples. Husbands are more optimistic in their reports. Personal characteristics are more significant in the success of marriages than socio-economic factors or availability of children Friendships and activity patterns vary: women profess a stronger need for friendships, but for both sexes those high in marital satisfaction tend to have fewer outside activities. Health affects marital quality only in that illness in one partner is constructive to the relationship, increasing the bond between partners.

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Marriages Over Half a Century: A Longitudinal Study

Dorothy Field and Sylvia Weismaus

Until recently marriages that endured 20 years or longer have been considered "long-term". Yet it is very likely that a marriage of 40 years differs considerably from the same marriage at 20 years, and the relationship will probably evolve further by the time the marriage is 50 or 60 years old. Factors such as retirement, relationship with adult children, mobility, health, and time availability are very different at each of these stages. And only in recent years have marriages of 50 or more years duration been plentiful enough to be studied.

In the 1960s studies reported an inevitable linear decline in marital satisfaction (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Luckey, 1966). But during the 1970s researchers noted a curvilinear trend in satisfaction, often with a precipitous drop during the child-rearing stage, but moving up again in the post-parental period, although not attaining the original level (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Glenn, 1975; Rollins & Cameron, 1974).

Current studies of long-term marriages have had mixed results, finding that marital satisfaction or quality ranges from quiet desperation through resignation to great fulfillment. Todd (1984), studying 48 couples married 50 years or more, found strong dissatisfaction in about half; usually the wives expressed less happiness. Other studies found a high level of both conflict and satisfaction in marriage (Argyl & Furnham, 1981) and a decrease in marital problems after the children left (Argyl & Furnham, 1981), as well as a "remarkably close" relationship after 50 years (Parron, 1982).

All of these studies, however, are cross-sectional, assessing marriages at one time only. It would be valuable to examine the course taken by the same marriages over many years. Are the results to date cohort-specific, or do they describe changes that are likely to take place in most long-term marriages? Would the effects noted in the cross-sectional studies appear over time in individual marriages as well?

We cannot depend on retrospective reports from the couples themselves, for their perceptions of the marriage have been shown to change with time and circumstances (Field, 1981a, 1981b). Only a longitudinal study, in which the same husbands and wives have been interviewed over many years, can assess stability or change in marital adjustment and marital satisfactions.

We are fortunate that longitudinal data exist in the Berkeley Older Generation Study. This is a group of people, now old-old, who are the survivors of a representative group of young adults first seen in Berkeley, California, 55 years ago. Seventeen couples survived and were interviewed in old-old age, and these are the subjects of this study.

Method

Subjects

Members of the Berkeley Older Generation Study were part of a sample drawn from parents of every third baby born in Berkeley in 1928-1929, and they still are representative of surviving people of their ages in the United States at this time. They were intensively interviewed in young adulthood (1928-1929), when their babies became part of the Guidance Study (Macfarlane, 1938) or the Berkeley Growth Study (Bayley, 1956) at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley; again in middle age, 1945-1947; in young-old

age, 1968-1969, (Maas & Kuypers, 1974); and in old-old age, 1982-1983. The 17 couples have been married 55 to 69 years, with an average of 59 years. Ages at the final interview range from 73 to 93 for the men and 73 to 88 for the women; the modal birth year is 1900. Only 14 of the couples were interviewed in young-old age, and some of the variables have been coded to date on only a sub-sample of this group. In old-old age Ns are reduced for some of the variables: two of the wives are suffering from Alzheimer's disease, and fewer variables can be scored for them.

Although the subjects of study at most number only 34 people and in many analyses the N is smaller than this, it is the only known group of married couples about whom there is information gathered over more than 50 years.

Analysis

Data gathering. In all the interviews husband and wife were interviewed separately by two different interviewers. These were wide-ranging, semi-structured, open-ended interviews covering many topics. Because the participants were so familiar with the Institute and its aims and were so certain of the confidentiality of their disclosures, we believe that our subjects revealed far more about themselves than would otherwise have been the case. In old-old age all but three of the couples were interviewed by the two authors; one of us was a member of the interview team for the others.

Coding. Each interview was read and coded by two trained psychologists. The final codes were based either on complete independent agreement between the raters or were made only after a thorough discussion between the raters had eliminated any disagreements. All raters were "naive": no rater read the transcript of the other member of a couple, nor did a rater read a transcript from another

period of a person she had already coded.

The marital adjustment rating was designed in the early years of the Guidance Study by Macfarlane (1938) and her coworkers: the same scale was used for each time period:

1. exceptionally happy adjustment, frankness, affection, agreement, interests
2. above average, many satisfactions, no disruptions
3. normal adjustment, occasional upsets, real satisfactions
4. working arrangement difficult, more or less chronic tension
5. extreme conflict, separation, disrupting

The marital adjustment ratings described above were based exclusively on a reading of one interview. In addition, the two authors made a clinical rating of the marital adjustment of each couple in old-old age based on all the impressions we gathered during the interviews, including the interactions between the members of the couple before and after the interviews and during breaks for tea and cookies. Only after the interviews were read and coded did we begin the case studies of each couple that we have reported at other meetings (Weishaus & Field, 1981a; 1981b).

Analysis. It is obvious that we can report here only a fraction of the rich data we have been able to gather. We will examine the perceptions of the spouses about their mutual affairs, particularly, of course, the marriage itself, and how these perceptions change over time. Through correlational analysis we will examine associations between many attributes and situations and marital satisfactions, and we will compare the men with the women on the strength of these associations. We will focus on the transition between young-old (YO), when the couples had been married more than 40 years, and old-old (OO), nearly 15 years later.

Results

Agreement about the marriage

It is clear from our results that husbands and wives view their marriage differently: the correlations for the rating of marital adjustment are only .40 in YO and .20 in OO. At both periods the men view their marriages more favorably than do the women, although this difference reaches significance only in OO, $t(15) = 2.18$, $p = .014$. On the 5-point scale given above the mean was 2.4 for the women and 2.0 for the men in YO and 2.0 and 1.6 in OO.

The clinical rating made by the authors (mean = 2.38) was compared with the ratings made on the basis of reading one spouse's interview. The clinical ratings are very similar to the women's ratings, but the men's ratings indicate greater marital adjustment than the independent clinical judgment shows. The wives seem to be more realistic assessors of their marriages. The correlations with the clinical ratings are high for both: $r = .59$ for women and .62 for men. The members of the couple agree with the interviewers' assessments of their marriage more strongly than they agree with each other's assessments.

Not only do the men take a more favorable view of their marriages in general, they also report fewer disagreements than do the women, both in YO, $t(7) = 3.06$, $p = .018$, and in OO, $t(14) = 2.75$, $p = .016$. Not surprisingly, the number of disagreements correlates with marital adjustment at both life stages: $rs = .55$ and .45 for the women and .39 and .75 for the men at YO and OO, respectively.

Predictably, the men rate more highly the importance of sex to the relationship than do the women in OO, $t(8) = 2.08$, $p = .074$. The correlation between spouses cannot be computed, for <u>every</u> man reported that sex was always an important part of the relationship for both of them. (Only four women made this report!) The importance of sex is

only marginally associated with marital adjustment for the wives, r = .23, but it is strongly so for the husbands, r = .75. (This question was not asked in YO.)

The husbands take a rosier view of the earlier years, as well, for their retrospective reports of their marriages in the past are higher than those of their wives in YO, t(4) = 2.45, p = .07, and in OO, t(13) = 2.13, p = .054. The present quality of marital adjustment colors their recollections of their marriages in the past, r = .33 and .47 for the women and .85 and .54 for the men, at YO and OO, respectively.

Although both members of the couple are likely to agree in OO about how much they do together, r = .58, only for the men does this affect marital satisfaction: the more activities are shared by the couple the greater the husband's satisfaction, r = 70. (For women, r = 13.) In YO, however, both wives, r = .60, and husbands, r = 78, who report that they do many things together are high in marital satisfaction.

When asked in YO if they felt they had grown apart over the years, only one woman and none of the men felt that the relationship had grown more distant. Instead, 29% of the women and 25% of the men reported that they had grown <u>closer</u>. In OO this proportion increased to 47% and 37%, reflecting the increasing satisfactions that we observed in the case studies. The feeling of growing closer is correlated with marital adjustment for women, r = .26 and .51, and for men, r = .65 and .49, in YO and OO. However, the two members of each couple are much more likely to agree that they have grown closer in OO, r = .45, than they were in YO, r = .05.

Marital adjustment is stable across time as well. The correlations between YO and OO are .62 and .63 for women and men. It is

interesting that there is more consistency in wives' and husbands' views of their marriages over time than there is between husbands' and wives' assessments of the marriage at the same time.

Socio-economic factors

The men report that their families are financially better off than do the women, but this difference is significant only in OO, $t(14) = 2.26$, $p = .041$. The financial status of the family has little effect on the quality of the marriage either for women, $r = -.34$ and .27, or men, $r = -.20$ and .34, in YO and OO, respectively.

Amount of education plays no role in marital satisfaction, $r = .20$ and $-.12$ for women and $-.27$ and $-.12$ for men, in YO and OO.

The occupation of the husband is not a factor in marital satisfaction at either life stage, $r = .14$ and .20 for women and .35 and .24 for men in YO and OO.

Family circumstances

These couples have an average of 2.2 children; only one couple has as many as four. The number of children has little effect on the marital adjustment of the parents, $r = .10$ and .38 for women and $-.32$ and .08 for men, in YO and OO. For the most part, there is considerable agreement within the couples about their children: Their reports agree about relationships, $r = .43$, contact with, $r = .46$, and bond with children, $r = .69$ in OO. Yet the parents are not in agreement about how close are their feelings with their children, $r = -.21$, nor about how well satisfied they are with the adult children at age 50+, $r = .09$.

The amount of satisfaction they feel toward their children is not associated with marital satisfaction in OO, $r = .20$ for women and $-.04$ for men. By and large, they are quite well satisfied with the way their children have turned out (means of 1.6 on a 5-point scale). (Too little information is available from YO to report.)

The amount of contact the couples have with their children has little effect on their marital satisfaction in YO, r = .01 and .38, but more in OO, r = .20 and .52, for women and men. Those whose marital satisfaction is high have more contact with their children.

Marital satisfaction is strongly associated with bond with child at both times for both members of the couple: r = .41 and .58 for women and .53 and .49 for men, in YO and OO. The entire family seems to be tied up in the feelings of satisfaction; even at this late stage of life the children play an important role in the family dynamic.

Friendship and club activities

Most of this group are less involved beyond the family in OO then they were in YO, t(12) = 3.86, p = .002 for women and t(13) = 1.79, p = .05 for men. But this involvement is not related to marital adjustment: r = .23 and -.09 for women and r = -.21 and .09 for men in YO and OO. Although the sexes do not differ in the amount of such activity, they apparently are not involved as couples, for the relationship between spouses' amount of activity is nonexistent: r = .10 in YO and .06 in OO.

The women are more involved with friends than the men in OO, t(11) = 1.93, p = .08, and more women feel that they still want and need friendships, t(12) = 3.12, p = .009. These differences, while evident, were not significant in YO. The desire for friendship is not related to marital satisfaction at either life stage for the men, r = .09 and -.25, and only somewhat more for the women in OO, r = .14 and -.40. Women with high marital satisfaction do not feel as great a need for friendships.

Both men and women feel they still want friendships, for the over-time correlations are .68 for women and .47 for men. However, the actual contact with friends has dropped for the men, t(7) = 2.36,

$p = .05$, from once or twice a week in YO to twice a month on average in OO. The women have maintained their contacts unchanged. Of course, it is likely that more of the men's friends have been lost to death.

The frequency of club activities, including church attendance, is related to marital satisfaction in OO both for women, $r = -.51$, and men, $r = -.41$. The greater the frequency of activity the less likely it is that marital satisfaction will be great. There was no such association in YO, $r = .18$ and .10. Men and women are about equally active at each life stage. Both men and women are somewhat less active in clubs in OO than they were in YO, but this longitudinal difference is too slight to be significant.

Personal characteristics

Intelligence is not associated with marital satisfactions either for women, $r = .13$ and .12, or for men, $r = .33$ and .22, in YO and OO.

There is little association between self-reported health and marital adjustment in YO, $r = -.25$ and $-.18$, or OO, $r = -.40$ and .06. Men are significantly less healthy in OO than they were in YO, $t(13) = 2.35$, $p = .035$; the women are unchanged. Both men and women still report themselves as better than average in health, also noted by Cockerham et al.(1983). It appears that health affects marital quality only in that illness in one partner is constructive to the relationship, increasing the bond between partners.

The degree of anomie has some association with marital satisfaction in YO for husbands, $r = .38$, and wives, $r = .66$, and for husbands in OO, $r = .47$ (wives $r = .06$). In OO the men were less likely to report feelings of alienation and lack of purpose than were the women, $t(10) = 2.29$, $p = .045$, but there was no difference in YO. As a group, these old people are low in anomie, with mean scores of 17.7 and 16.1 for the women and 19.0 and 18.2 for the men in YO and

OO, on a scale running from 5 to 25.

In view of their generally more optimistic responses, it is not surprising that the men are rated higher than the women in life satisfaction in YO, $t(12) = 3.00$, $p = .041$, and in OO, $t(14) = 3.17$, $p = .007$. Life satisfaction is more closely related to marital adjustment in YO, $r = .50$ and $.53$, than in OO, $r = .13$ and $.36$ for women and men, respectively. There is virtually no drop in life satisfaction over the years from YO to OO, either for men or for women.

Conclusion

In sum, it appears that the men are generally more satisfied with their lives: more marital satisfaction, more feelings of agreement with their wives, more pleasure in the way their relationships have been over time, more pleasure in shared activities and in closer affectional ties. These feelings of well-being about the marital relationships are echoed in their life satisfaction, lack of anomie, satisfaction with financial circumstances, and their apparent contentment in pulling back a little from their former level of outside activities.

Yet we must note that two of the men are primary caregivers for the two Alzheimer's patients, one of whom is maintained at home; one man is the sole caretaker for a cancer-ridden wife (who died within six weeks after the interview), two are coping with wives who have moderately troublesome memory losses, one is cancer-ridden himself (and died three months after his interview). In fact, only seven of the 17 couples are free of serious health problems. In spite of all this, the men are generally satisfied.

We come away with a strong impression of buoyancy in these old men. They have coped with adversity and still are coping, and for the most part they are doing it very well. They are survivors, they

know it, and they are proud of it.

And what about the women? They are just as involved with clubs and church as they were and they continue to affirm the importance of friendship. They are just as involved with family as ever. They have not declined in health (according to their own assessments of it). However, they do acknowledge that they are counting on others more than they did.

This generation of women was socialized to be helpmeets. It was never as important for them to put the best face on things. Although the women, too, are caring for sick partners, and have seen their circles constrict, our longitudinal material shows that they are remarkable in their adaptability to changing circumstances. Yet they are modest and unassuming about their accomplishments. We suggested above that the women may be more realistic about their marriages, and we suspect that this is the case in other aspects of their lives, as well. Fewer of the variables are associated with marital adjustment; fewer have changed over time. The women seem somehow less affected by their experiences.

Clearly, we plan to pursue these findings further. We will look for situations and characteristics from earlier life stages that predict marital satisfactions in old age. We will compare these married couples with other members of the study who are widowed or remarried. We will compare them with people who were seen in YO but did not survive. Our hunch is that these long-term marital survivors have capacities that have enabled them to get the most our of their relationships. We do know that as couples they think of themselves as survivors, and they express pride in this fact.

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